

THE BRITISH HAIKU SOCIETY AWARDS 2016 - RESULTS

HAIKU SECTION

Judges –David Jacobs and Andrew Shimield

The winners are Robert Kingston (UK) and Scott Mason (USA)

The runners-up are John Barlow (UK) and Claire Everett (UK)

David Jacobs writes:

A strong entry reduced to a long list of 46, all of them eminently publishable. If only it could have stopped there! There were too many possible winners for my liking. Over the next few days I reluctantly put a line through a number of haiku I had considered for the ultimate prize if for no other reason, the judging process would have continued ad infinitum at the risk of my own sanity. Nonetheless I shall hope to see many of those not selected in quality haiku journals in the coming months.

When I learned the names and nationalities of my final 10, they represented a re-assuring mix. Some names were familiar from journals, one or two were unknown (to me anyway) but, most of all, they came from all over the world. As it happened, the two top choices were UK entries but I considered most of the other eight as potential winners as the pack was shuffled and re-shuffled.

For instance, I was mesmerised by this from Semih Ozmeric (Turkey):

starry night/a few light years away/my dog is still alive

The idea of someone from another world receiving light from Earth at a time when the writer's dog was still alive took my breath away.

And who would not smile at: *costume party/the child without a mask/makes a face.*

This is from Jay Friedenbergl (USA), the humour betraying an underlying seriousness and pathos. *smartphone screen/the setting sun/swiped away* from Kenya's Mercy Ikuri took me (a techno dope) a bit of working out but the combination of natural world and hi-tech worked its magic, not least because of the writer's rhythmical skill and the use of alliteration which never imposed on its subject.

Other poems from the eight 'special mentions' as follows:

harsh winter/squirrels gnaw the tines/of shed antlers; Debbie Strange (Canada)

a line of cyclists/becomes the last row/Flanders fields; Graham Duff (UK)

rain holding off/the split gunny sack/leaks mice; Marietta McGregor (Australia)

missing child/the distinctive cry/of a fan-tailed pigeon; Cynthia Rowe (Australia)

casket catalogue.../the undertaker tells us/to take our time; Chris Bays (USA)

Runner-up – John Barlow (UK)

wheat field to wheat field the streak of a fox

Like the haiku by Debbie Strange, this mini gem is clearly the work of someone at ease with his subject matter, environment, natural world, call it what you will, confident in his pen stroke and arousing envy in myself as a long time city dweller. It could easily have won. There was daringness in the repetition of 'wheat fields', and the picture presented by the fox's on-going 'streak' through the wheat is striking. All is seen in a single, almost joyous flash and is gone. How could this haiku be written other than in a single line, a short, speedy, unbroken journey across the page mirroring the streak itself? I'm not quite sure why, but I was reminded of Ted Hughes's 'sharp hot stink' of the 'thought-fox'.

Winner – Robert Kingston (UK)

*not yet spring
the neighbour's ball still
in the garden*

What exactly is happening in this poem? On one level, absolutely nothing. We have a 'still' ball that is 'still' in the garden. We have neighbours who appear not to venture out in the winter months. The ball is not going back in a hurry and is not being asked for. After all, it is 'not yet spring'.

Basho asked '*my neighbour/how does he live*'. In Robert's poem I wondered about the relationship between the neighbours. There were all sorts of possible connotations. The haiku seemed like an invitation to weave a story around the protagonists. As with all good haiku the 'unspoken' element is paramount. The poet has shown us something and left without telling.

This quiet, understated haiku, with a kigo that is truly meaningful, forced its way to the top of the pile and refused to budge.

Andrew Shimield writes:

I was pleased and honoured to be asked to be one of the judges for this year's awards, and when the 436 entries were emailed to me, I set about the task. I find it hard to appreciate haiku on a computer screen and so printed them all out and invented a haiku viewing device (patent pending): a sheet of white card with a haiku sized rectangle cut in it. Thus I could see each haiku on its own and assess its merits or shortcomings.

The old adage of "show don't tell" formed the basis of my first cut. In a substantial number of entries the poet was telling me what I should think or feel about the subject of the poem or telling me what they felt about it, rather than inviting me in to experience it for myself. To quote Ken Jones: "... haiku must spring from a mind open and unobstructed by any urge to make something of the reality that has come to the poet's attention" (Zen and the art of haiku from A Silver Tapestry p.77).

Then I made use of Ernest Berry's sound advice (Judging Haiku – A Silver Tapestry p.175):

"Was it:

1. brief 2. believable 3. evocative 4. fresh .5. poetic 6. syntactic ?

Did it:

1. scan 2. sing 3.expose 4. juxtapose 5. ahaa! ? "

and reduced the number down to around 50. These would have made an excellent anthology to showcase the quality of haiku being written today.

Multiple re-readings and R H Blyth helped to reduce this number to a final two: “These are some of the characteristics of the state of mind which the creation and appreciation of haiku demand: Selflessness, Loneliness, Grateful Acceptance, Wordlessness, Non-intellectuality, Contradictoriness, Humour, Freedom, Non-morality, Simplicity, Materiality, Love and Courage”.

My runner-up is Claire Everett (UK):

Silent Night...
in a storefront window
Aleppo on mute

Quite traditionally presented with the seasonal reference of a Christmas carol, but the 3rd line takes us away from what we might expect from a shop window at Christmas to world events and human suffering. There is a strong feeling of wabi-sabi here, we respond with our own feelings of loneliness, inadequacy and injustice.

My winner - Scott Mason (USA):

starlight harboured in shells washed ashore

A classic example of what Martin Lucas referred to as “Haiku as Poetic Spell”. The line has a pleasing rhythm and the repeated *sh* sounds put us at the edge of the water. The observation is so clean and pure that it immediately becomes ours (“when composing a verse let there not be a hair’s breadth separating your mind from what you write...” Basho). The word “harboured” feels just right: peaceful and inclusive, giving the poem a reverential quality. To end with Blyth: “the object of our lives is to look at, listen to, touch, taste things. Without them, - these sticks, stones, feathers, shells – there is no Deity”.

Well done to the winners and all who entered!

TANKA SECTION

Judges – David Terelinck and Caroline Skanne

The winners are John Barlow (UK) and Debbie Strange (Canada)
The runners-up are Debbie Strange (Canada) and Chen-ou Liu (Canada)

David Terelinck writes:

Poetry is an echo, asking a shadow to dance.
Carl Sandburg

In judging the BHS Tanka Awards for 2016, I specifically looked for tanka that was not:

- ~ clichéd
- ~ mawkish or sentimental
- ~ contrived and obvious
- ~ telling too much
- ~ overworked

~ steeped in stated emotions

All entries were read several times with this in mind, and often read aloud many times over. In doing so, I read for the echo that called to me again and again. Which poems kept drawing me back; which were the ones that would not release me? I also looked for the shadow in the tanka, and within that shadow I found the questions, and sometimes the answers, that fleshed out a deeper reading experience for me.

From this process, I arrived at a shortlist of 10 tanka from 164 submissions. These 10 short poems made it a pleasure to judge submissions that, on the whole, were not of an outstanding quality. Too many poems were excluded from consideration due to:

- ~ a lack of originality
- ~ stale imagery and metaphors
- ~ trying too hard to be clever (and it showed)
- ~ a lack of lyrical and poetic writing
- ~ failing to be a tanka at all
- ~ shortcomings in technique and form
- ~ telling rather than showing
- ~ not leaving any dreaming room for the reader

However, the 10 shortlisted poems stood out on every reading. Each contained an echo that made me pause, and listen intently. Every poem on the short-list had the shadow-land of dreaming room, and was open to reader interpretation.

Narrowing these 10 to the winner and runner-up required a further review of the quality components of tanka. Both the winner and runner-up are well constructed, lyrical, and employed interesting metaphors and imagery. I also felt they had something of value to say that was worth hearing.

First place - John Barlow (UK):

an old paperback
slips from her hand . . .
the whirring
of sparrows' wings
in summer dust

This tanka is economical; 15 words across 20 syllables. It has excellent meter, rolls off the tongue easily, and is pleasing to the ear. Tanka were originally short songs, and this poem's musical quality is greatly enhanced with alliterative 'p' sounds, and the double 'r' in lines three and four.

The simple language employs an original metaphor.

an old paperback
slips from her hand . . .

Fresh and descriptive writing reveals a life that's slipping, or perhaps has already slipped, away. No more needs to be said in this poem of ageing, loss, and death. These are old themes in tanka, but approached from an original perspective. We do not know any more of this person than she has lost her place, both in the book and life. This is the magic of dreaming room as we wonder who this woman is. Is she just asleep, or has she passed away?

It is an old paperback. Perhaps much loved through generations. Maybe one that's been read a dozen times over her lifespan. And perhaps she wanted to read it one last time before slipping away. The paperback being old may be a subtle hint to the subject's age.

the whirring
of sparrows' wings
in summer dust

This evokes transience; our lives, next to creation, are fleeting. This subtly echoes the phrase 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust'. We are here but for a short time, and we may be no more than 'summer dust' compared to the light of the universe. The flutter of sparrow wings echoes a heart that is frail and about to quit.

This tanka reveals the beauty of life, transient and gentle. The reader feels a sense of melancholy, but without that emotion being overtly stated.

The runner-up by Debbie Strange (Canada) was a strong contender. It employed solid construction, rhythmical language, original metaphor, and vast amounts of dreaming room:

impossible
to hold the light
of mercury . . .
your memory
slips away

This tanka says much in 19 syllables and 11 words.

impossible
to hold the light
of mercury

Anyone who's broken a quicksilver thermometer knows it is slippery and virtually impossible to corral. The mirrored surface of liquid mercury reflects light. But is the poet only referring to chemistry? Is there a planetary or classical reference here too? Mercury, is the fastest moving of all the planets. And the Roman god Mercury also travels quickly.

Despite being creatures of habit, and wanting to hold on to what is good and pleasing, things can slip through our fingers like quicksilver. Something that often slips away before we're ready, is memory:

your memory
slips away

There is a dual interpretation of these last two lines. Is this the tanka subject's memory failing? Or perhaps the narrator's memory of someone is fading over time? It is this dreaming room that makes this so engaging to the reader.

This is an original take on memory loss by teaming and opposing it with a fast-moving object.

Memory is starting to fade, tarnishing next to the gleaming silver light of mercury. Memory and mercury are both be elusive, and our hold on them can be beyond our control. Could it be that this subject once had a brilliant 'quicksilver mind' as well?

Again, the subtle poetic device of alliteration with the pleasing 'm' and 'p' sounds heightens the effect of this tanka. This poet understands the importance of tanka being pleasing to the ear when read aloud.

Congratulations to both winner and the runner-up on writing excellent tanka that have stayed with me long after each reading.

Caroline Skanne writes:

First of all I would like to thank all the contributors. It has been a privilege, not to mention pleasure, to read so many different contemporary voices in tanka.

The winner - Debbie Strange (Canada):

tracks of birds
meander through snow . . .
the surgeon
marks her left breast
with a cross

The winning entry stood out to me immediately. The use of strong, fresh images successfully creates both contrast and impact, while leaving enough space for the reader to fill in. I have read this tanka over and over again, and still, it has not lost its appeal. The strength lies in the juxtaposition between different types of marks. . . I felt myself drawn in, wishing to further explore the man-made nature of the cross left by the surgeon, in relation to the 'tracks of birds' in snow. The effect is striking, dramatic even. The reader is further invited to explore the silences between the five lines, and to follow the meandering not just of bird tracks, but also of thoughts. Skilfully, the poet provides a window for the reader to look through, placing us right there, as humans, at our most vulnerable. Written in the third person, the tanka ingeniously builds on the idea of looking in from the outside. It could be that the writer is someone close to the person about to undergo surgery, or perhaps, a way to detach oneself from a difficult event. Either way, the effect is powerful, as we are welcomed to both observe and fill in the blanks with our own experiences, recollecting those crosses and events that have marked and shaped us. Executed with precision this tanka is succinct and cutting, yet at the same time elegant, lyrical and evocative.

The selection of a runner-up proved harder, simply because there were many worthy of a write-up. In the end I was guided to select the one that conjured up the strongest response in me.

Runner-up - Chen-ou Liu (Canada):

a kid trying
to kick sea foam back
where it came from
I remember the first time
a white man yelled at me

This bold and thought-provoking tanka is uncomfortable without being confrontational. It provides food for thought, in a world where it is much needed. In particular, the third line 'where it came from' is fascinating. This sentence alone, can be seen to sum up the tanka, and splendidly so. Racism is not something all of us encounter; it is multifaceted, and often hidden. Yet the poet succeeds in bringing the issue to the surface, using simple straightforward images, such as 'a white man yelled at me' and 'to kick sea foam back'. The sea in its vastness, in this context, can be seen to represent those things we cannot fully grasp or understand, something that perhaps makes us feel small, afraid even. The use of 'kick' implies aggression. Add to it, the simple recollection of an event that

happened in the past – 'I remember the first time' – but is still playing on the person's mind. . . Like sea foam reaching the shore, so does a memory resurface here, prompted by the simple act of a child? This is a great example of how tanka can be used to explore personal experience in a wider cultural and political context, without losing its lyricism or reflective nature. In such, it has at its core, the power to instigate change.

Administrator's Note:

Congratulations to the winners and runners-up!

The British Haiku Society would like to thank all four judges for the time and careful consideration they have put into selecting the best of the entries in each category and into producing these insightful reports.

We are also grateful to all participants in the BHS Awards. 2016 was a very successful year with an increase from the previous one – we received 436 haiku and 164 tanka from 17 countries: Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Kenya, New Zealand, Russia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Turkey, UK, and USA. 52% of the poets were from UK, 16 % from USA, 10% from Australia, and 3-4% from Canada, Italy and New Zealand, etc.

Looking forward to your entries for the BHS Awards 2017!

Iliyana Stoyanova

BHS Awards Administrator